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ABSTRACT

Providing a framework for a symposium exploring the influence of physical attractiveness on the socialization process, this paper (1) offers a working definition of physical attractiveness, (2) reviews stereotypes associated with attractiveness, and (3) discusses a social network perspective on the influence of attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is conceptualized as being a personal physionomic attribute achieving status as high, moderate, or low as a function of cultural criteria. Attractive individuals are stereotypically perceived as friendly, popular, happy, nonaggressive, well-adjusted, trustworthy, and so on. Unattractive individuals are routinely viewed as unhappy, lonely, maladjusted, aggressive, and unfriendly. Research shows that stereotypes based on attractiveness are fairly extensive, are biased in favor of attractive individuals, and are heavily endorsed by the American public. The social network view holds that socialization can be understood only when all salient socializers and the child are considered as reciprocally influential and only when the cultural context is taken into account. With respect to attractiveness, the social network view encourages the study of both the transmission of attractiveness stereotypes and differential reactions to children with varying degrees of attractiveness. (RH)

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Viewing Attractiveness Socialization from a Social Network Perspective

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Research on the influence of physical attractiveness in human functioning has been extensive since the early 1970's. Indeed, over 500 published articles now document the role of attractiveness in the attribution, social cognition, interpersonal communication and socialization processes. A close inspection of this extensive research reveals that the influence of attractiveness has been studied carefully in relation to some variables, but has received little attention in relation to others. For example, the impact of attractiveness in jury trials is now painfully clear with attractive plaintiffs and defendants receiving far more favorable juridic decisions than their unattractive counterparts, with only few exceptions.

The impact of attractiveness on the socialization process has had comparatively little attention. Today's symposium focused on the potentially major impact that attractiveness may have on socialization. In order to provide a framework for the symposium, I'd like to offer a working definition of physical attractiveness, briefly review stereotypes associated with attractiveness, and present a social network perspective on the influence of attractiveness.

Defining Attractiveness

Previous researchers of physical attractiveness seem to have had a difficult time of defining attractiveness. Indeed,

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researchers have tended to either ignore such definitions or simply note that attractiveness is difficult to define. Recently I asked a large group of students to define physical attractiveness. Their responses ran the full length of possibilities from definitions based on specific body parts, such as bright eyes, straight teeth, mesomorphic bodies, etc., to definitions based on the body gestalt and how attractiveness is a coherent whole. Very little consensus existed, however, in these definitions. When students were asked to list very attractive and very unattractive people, their lists were fairly lengthy-- and consistent! Thus, people tend to agree that Cheryl Tiegs and Tom Sellick are objectively very attractive and that the Wicked Witch of the West and the Hunchback of Notre Dame are objectively very unattractive. In fact, raters in numerous studies from Walster's classic computer dance study in 1966 on seem to agree fairly well on the objective attractiveness of rated persons. But, what makes these rated individuals attractive or unattractive?

For our purposes, we would like to offer a social consensus definition which seems to represent the best "fit" with the existing attractiveness literature. Specifically, physical attractiveness is a personal, physionomically-based attribute. The degree to which this attribute is judged high, moderate or low is a function of cultural criteria and the acceptance of these criteria by the social group. Thus, the definition of attractiveness in the United States would most likely vary from that adopted in the People's Republic or

Venezuela. The American definition seems to contain emphases on both specific body parts, particularly the face, and on the overall relationship of these parts to the whole. Thus, bright eyes, clear complexion, straight teeth, an athletic body and so forth are all indices of higher attractiveness, but the highest level of attractiveness appears achieved by those having a good, consistent and integrated fit among the parts. In sum, our working definition of physical attractiveness is a personal, physionomic attribute which achieves status as high, moderate or low as a function of cultural criteria . In our culture, high attractiveness is conceived of in terms of having particular physical characteristics and an integrated balance among these characteristics.

The Stereotypes

Stereotypes based on varying levels of attractiveness are fairly well-known and documented. Attractive individuals are typically perceived as friendly, popular, happy, non-aggressive, well-adjusted, trustworthyand so on. Unattractive individuals are routinely viewed as unhappy, lonely, maladjusted, aggressive and unfriendly. Certainly it should be noted that exceptions exist. For instance, the "dumb jock" or the "dumb blond", both of whom are typically judged high in attractiveness are also viewed as less intelligent. In general, though, attractive people are viewed in more positive ways than unattractive people. For instance, in a study we published last year (Downs, Reagan, Garrett & Kolodzy, 1982), several hundred adolescents and adults completed a questionnaire designed

to tap agreement or disagreement with cultural stereotypes of attractiveness. To our complete amazement, the vast majority of our sample endorsed all of the attractiveness stereotypes. Interestingly, greater agreement with these stereotypes was found among males, adolescents and whites compared with females, adults and blacks or chicanos, although general agreement with the stereotypes existed among all subgroups. Overall, then, stereotypes based on attractiveness are fairly extensive, biased in favor of attractive individuals, and are heavily endorsed by the American public.

A Social Network View of the Influence of Attractiveness

Given the pervasive nature of attractiveness stereotyping in this culture and the general agreement with these stereotypes, it seems extremely important to examine the influence of attractiveness on socialization processes. We have elected to approach our study from a social network perspective. This perspective is derived from the work of several developmental psychologists using a similar framework in other areas of research. These psychologists include Arnold Sameroff, R. Q. Bell, Gerald Adams, Judy Langlois, Michael Lewis, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Ross Parke and Willard Hartup.

Essentially, a social network perspective considers socialization as a process of reciprocal interaction with numerous important socializers in a particular cultural context. This diagram (see diagram) shows this perspective graphically.

Thus, the socialization of a given child can be understood only when each salient socializer is examined and the influence of various socializers on the child and the child's influences on her socializers are considered. Of course, all of these influences are heavily mediated by the cultural milieu.

In terms of the influence of attractiveness on socialization, each of the socializers as well as the child herself are considered important. Further, while each of the socializers hypothetically exerts an influence, the child is seen as having a crucial role in the socialization process as well.

The social network perspective would seem to have utility in understanding socialization and attractiveness in two ways:

1. the manner in which children are exposed to, learn and adopt attractiveness stereotypes and
2. the ways in which attractive and unattractive children are socialized.

Thus, each of the socializers shown is a potential repository of attractiveness stereotypes and each may pass the stereotypes on to children. And, each of the socializers may react differently to the child, depending on that child's level of attractiveness.

To summarize, the social network view holds that socialization can be understood only when all salient socializers and the child herself are considered as reciprocally-influential and only when the cultural context is considered. In terms of attractiveness, the social network view encourages the study

of both 1) the transmission of attractiveness stereotypes and 2) differential reactions to children with varying degrees of attractiveness.

The research to be presented in this symposium will include examinations of the influence of all the socializers shown in the diagram with the exception of peers. It should be noted that peer influences on the attractiveness-based socialization process are quite important and that only time constraints prevent a thorough coverage of our research on peer influences. In brief, our research on peer influences has suggested that 1) preschool-age peers clearly differentially react to attractive and unattractive children, giving more rewards to attractive, compared with unattractive, children and 2) children's self-conceptions of attractiveness appear to at least partially reflect their peers' judgments of them. Thus, young children state self-judgments of attractiveness which are quite similar to attractiveness judgments made of them by peers. Interestingly, children's attractiveness self-judgments have not been found to be similar to the judgments made of them by other socializers such as parents, teachers or other adults. Thus, our intent in this symposium is <u>not</u> to ignore the role of peers in the attractiveness socialization process. On the contrary, peers seem to play a very important part in this process.

To summarize this introductory overview, 1) the role of

attractiveness in socialization processes has received comparatively little empirical attention, AND 2) while definitions of attractiveness are elusive, our working definition of attractiveness will be a social consensus definition. Specifically, in American culture, high physical attractiveness is a product of specific, culturally-valued physical traits and an integrated balance among these traits. Low physical attractiveness appears to be the result of the lack of these valued traits and/or an imbalance among various physical attributes such as slight deviations of the eyes, crooked or missing teeth, obesity, dull eyes, and so on, 3) American stereotypes of attractiveness clearly favor persons judged as attractive and these stereotypes seem to have broad societal acceptance, and 4) a social network framework allows us to examine attractiveness-based socialization as a product of influences from both salient socializers and children themselves. In employing this perspective, a much-better overall understanding of attractiveness-based socialization is achieved.